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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 HANOI 000694

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

HHS/OSSI/DSI PASS TO OGHA AND FDA
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TAGS: [ECON](#) [EAGR](#) [SENV](#) [TBIO](#) [EFIN](#) [ETRD](#) [VM](#)
SUBJECT: VIETNAM'S FOOD SAFETY PROGRAMS LACK BITE

REF: A. HANOI 588 B. HANOI 2012 C. HANOI 421

11. (SBU) Summary: The second recent major cholera outbreak served as a backdrop to the recent March announcement by the Ministry of Health (MOH) to focus on food safety issues. Earlier this year, Vietnam initiated a USD 81 million-4-year plan consisting of six different food safety and hygiene projects. The projects will focus on improving food safety management throughout the country, including implementing better inspection techniques for food sold by street vendors. The Government of Vietnam (GVN) has sought to increase public awareness about food safety through the mass media. However, problems remain. The country still does not have sufficient food inspectors or laboratory capacity to examine all of the food producers and services across the country, nor an adequate regulatory framework to improve the situation. The GVN has yet to establish necessary mechanisms to prevent and clean up contaminated soil and water, which continue to introduce various pollutants into the food chain. End Summary.

STATE OF PLAY

12. (U) In early May 2008, the MOH's General Department of Preventive Medicine and Environmental Health (GDPMEH), formerly the Vietnam Administration of Preventive Medicine (VAPM), announced that the latest cholera outbreak had receded (Ref A). In the wake of what the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates are over 8 million cases of food poisoning a year among Vietnam's population of about 88 million, the GVN had responded to the outbreak with an aggressive campaign to inspect and close unsanitary food establishments. Since then, half of the unhygienic dog meat restaurants and street food stalls closed by the GVN have reopened after complying with regulations, according to Hoang Tien, Deputy Director General at MOH's Department of Food Safety and Hygiene. Deputy Director Tien told Econoff that Health inspectors are randomly re-checking food hygiene and sanitation standards.

BUDGETS AND OBJECTIVES

13. (U) In 2007, the GVN listed Food Hygiene and Safety as one of ten national target programs. The Prime Minister signed a decision to adopt a national food safety program for 2006-2010 (Ref B) to increase food safety management capacity to ensure food safety based on regional and international standards. The GVN has implemented the Program nationwide through six projects that aim to increase the management of food safety and quality; educate people on food safety; increase the ability of health inspectors to assess food safety; build up a food poisoning inspection system for diseases transmitted through food; and analyze pollution that leads to transmitting food-borne diseases. The program also seeks to ensure food safety in the production and processing of agricultural products and environmental safety and food safety for fishery

products.

14. (U) The cost estimate for implementing these six projects over four years is approximately USD 81 million. The GVN says the money "will be mobilized" from the national budget, local budgets, loans, credits and foreign support. For 2008, the GVN budget for these projects totals nearly USD 40 million. However, the state budget allocation for these six projects this year is only USD 6.8 million. Therefore, "mobilizing funds from other sources is an urgent need," according to Tran Dang, Director General at MOH's Vietnam Food Administration (VFA).

EDUCATION AND MEDIA CAMPAIGNS

15. (U) Despite ongoing GVN efforts, the number of entities that produce food products for the domestic market that fully understand modern standards and controls for food safety remains low, though the percentage increased from 47.8 percent in 2005 to 53.8 percent in 2007, according to a public statement from Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Sinh Hung. Vietnamese consumers, as well, seem uninformed about food safety issues. A recent survey by the online newspaper VnExpress of 3,740 readers found that 1540 readers (41 percent) were not concerned by the ongoing cholera epidemic because they thought it was a "normal diarrhea" epidemic. To combat this lack of awareness, MOH officials state that with technical assistance from the WHO they are "stepping up" the campaign to warn people of the dangers of eating uncooked vegetables, using unhygienic food outlets and drinking contaminated water.

16. (U) During the cholera outbreaks, MOH's Tien stated that the campaign used television, radio and newspaper to get the word out

HANOI 00000694 002 OF 003

about necessary food safety precautions. State-controlled mass media outlets carried interviews with health officers from the MOH and Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. Mass media outlets also featured online question and answer sessions regarding the outbreaks. More than six million flyers and posters and 1000 video tapes and CDs were distributed across Vietnam. More generally, the Department of Food Safety and Hygiene also has put out public notices in an effort "to raise people's awareness about food safety issues." Themes stressed in these notices include: 1) consuming well-cooked and clean food and drink; 2) washing hands regularly; 3) washing cooking materials and bowls thoroughly; 4) preserving food; 5) properly disposing of waste; and, 6) not eating raw food. In rural areas, MOH sent local officers to advise people how to cook and follow proper food safety precautions.

A MONTH OF "ACTION"

17. (U) Earlier last month, MOH launched an "action month for food safety and hygiene quality" (from April 15 to May 15) nationwide. A kickoff meeting, "Extended Health Partnership Group Meeting on Food Safety" was held, with invited participation by the WHO, the UN Food and Agricultural Organization and USDA. During the meeting, participants examined numerous inconsistent and inadequate laws, regulations and standards, highlighting the fundamental policy development challenges. Recommended activities included "speeding up" inspections and examination of food safety and hygiene; prompt detection and punishment of violations of food safety laws; and promoting the issuance of food safety certificates for establishing, producing and trading in food for restaurants and food vendors. However, the lack of adequate and sufficient laboratory capacity impedes testing, without which the GVN cannot fully enforce its food safety laws.

LIMITED FOOD SAFETY INSPECTION PROFESSIONALS

18. (U) Staffing for professional food safety inspection remains limited, particularly in the provinces. According to the VFA, which operates the government's food inspection, it has only 230 inspection professionals at all levels. According to Deputy

Director Tien, VFA has "no-well-trained inspection employees" and has "just submitted" a project proposal to train more inspectors in food safety. Due to the lack of inspectors, VFA rarely conducts food safety examinations and inspections except during peak times, for example, during the cholera outbreaks last April and during Tet Lunar holiday. Therefore, VFA only meets a very small part of the overall requirement for food safety inspection, Deputy Director Tien added.

STREET FOOD DANGERS

¶9. (U) Eating out has become habit for most Vietnamese, although restaurants are relatively new, opening in substantial numbers starting in the early 1990s. Street vendors are mobile, which makes it more difficult to monitor and improve their knowledge about food safety, according to Director Dang. Regulating food safety via certification has yet to be conducted effectively; only ten percent of food producers and retailers have received food safety certificates nationwide, according to a Thanh Nien Daily news report. With up to 49,000 food producers and 196,000 food and drink service shop across Vietnam, that leaves well over a hundred thousand unlicensed food providers serving millions of Vietnamese each day. Many street vendors reportedly try to avoid the food inspectors since their profits are too little to pay the fees of a certificate application.

¶10. (U) Due to concerns about hygiene and food safety, some consumers in larger, increasing numbers of urban dwellers have begun to shop at supermarkets rather than at street markets. In the first three months of this year, the number of customers at the major supermarkets increased 20-25 percent. For instance, at Big C supermarket in Hanoi (one of the few large markets with a western design), the produce department generates major revenues with vegetable sales alone earning the company a turnover of USD 1,875 a day, according to the Outlook news report.

LACK OF SANITATION SYSTEMS

¶11. (U) More than 30 lakes in Hanoi that tested positive for the presence of cholera bacteria are now being cleaned (Ref C). Nevertheless, according to MOH's Tien, the GVN needs to do more to clean lakes and inform residents about the cholera bacteria in

HANOI 00000694 003 OF 003

dangerous zones. With sanitation infrastructure dating back to the 19th Century, poor water quality continues to bedevil Hanoi's over three million residents. According to Ngo Trung Hai, Vice-Head of the Institute of Urban and Rural Planning, temporary toilets for construction set next to these lakes ensure that raw sewage enters the water system. These flows of raw sewage infected the lakes with cholera and other bacteria, according to Hai. Lack of toilets and hand washing facilities in homes and schools seriously affect people's health in rural Vietnam, according to a United Nations' report. Many people throughout the country use lake and river water for washing food, spreading dangerous bacteria, added Tien. Further, human feces are a primary source of fertilizer for many agricultural products.

COMMENT: AN UPHILL BATTLE

¶12. (SBU) GVN officials understand that they must build upon their effective response to recent food borne disease outbreaks. The best solution is a strong preventive system, based on sound coherent policy and regulations, focusing on upgrading food safety and hygiene practices. Hopefully, the MOH's six-point plan will form the basis of these upgrades. However, changing long-standing habits is difficult even when sufficient resources are brought to bear. Tien's comments indicate the GVN will continue to face an uphill battle in ensuring that Vietnam's food producers, sellers and consumers follow proper food safety procedures.

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